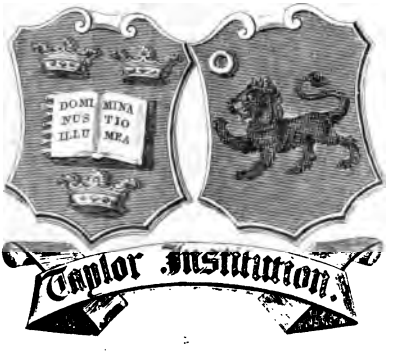

HAMLET;

FROM

A PSYCHOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW.

BY

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HAMLET.

On the occasion of an attempt to treat a subject of importance in a philosophical manner, the time I think is not inappropriate for an examination of the rather complicated and difficult questions, What is philosophy? and What are its aims? For, to some extent, according to the view taken of the nature and aims of philosophy will depend the place assigned to it in what may be called the hierarchy of thought, influencing also our classification of the other branches of human inquiry. Without troubling yourself about the meaning more or less vaguely attached to the term philosophy by persons sufficiently busy, according to their own notions, in the business and bustle of every-day life, and not caring to bother their heads about matters interesting only as they think to bookworms and specialists—if

you were to pick out of a crowd of educated thinking men half-a-dozen at random and ask each one separately for his definition of philosophy and explanation of its aims, it is quite possible that you would receive as many different answers as there were answerers. One would limit the term philosophy to mental philosophy, probably thinking at the time of metaphysics; another might attach it exclusively to another branch of mental philosophy called psychology; another would make it out to be something very like logic, and so on. From this it may be gathered that, in speaking of philosophy, one is not referring to an ultimate entity which all men recognise and attach the same meaning to, but that in dealing with this question it is necessary in the first instance to confess that we are handling a topic of great complexity, about the very nature of which men of apparently equal ability are divided in opinion, and this fact, therefore, should deter us from speaking on the subject with anything like dogmatic certainty. The wholesome dread of being dogmatic should not, however, deter any individual from launching forth into courageous speculation not inconsistent with scientific precision, nor from the attempt to form his own opinion on the subject

by using freely and boldly the materials at his command.

The view which I myself have ventured to adopt of the nature of philosophy and its place in the realm of thought is one which I think places it in a far higher position than any accorded to it by the views mentioned above. When we look abroad into the world around us, nature at first sight presents an unintelligible chaos in which the mind is apt occasionally to become almost lost. What we have to do is to decompose this chaos into single facts, making a separation of the facts, not only in our own minds, but in nature. Every great advance which has marked an epoch in the progress of science has consisted in a further approach made to the answer of the question, What are the laws of nature? or, in other words, What are the fewest and simplest general propositions, which, being granted, the whole existing order of nature would result? It is by analysis and synthesis—the breaking up and the classifying of the materials presented to us in the field of nature—that the various sciences are built up and organised, and we gradually acquire the power of looking upon nature, not as a collection of materials lying in hopeless confusion, but as an orderly system in

which there is no such thing as Chance, and where Law reigns supreme.

By the laws of science, then, we are able to classify the materials coming under our observation, and are able to form conceptions of their relations to one another. Having before us the whole of the various sciences, and all other sources of knowledge, whatever they may be, we next see the want of some one grand chain to which all these branches of knowledge may be attached, and by which they may all be linked in one harmonious whole or series, each in its place, ranging from the most fundamental simplicity to the highest complexity. In fact, having possessed ourselves of the data, we want next a doctrine. To supply this want and constitute itself this doctrine is, as far as I can see, the aim of philosophy. Philosophy according to this view may be described as the systematization of the conceptions furnished to us by all sources of knowledge. In this way I would place philosophy on the very highest pinnacle in the domain of thought, inasmuch as it, and it alone, would, according to this view, deal with the highest generalizations.

In conducting any scientific or philosophical investigation, if the mind is to do its work rightly, it must proceed according to certain

definite methods, to teach us which is the aim of the science of logic in its most extended form. But logic itself—I am speaking more particularly of what is called inductive logic—is nothing more than the codification, so to speak, of the rules of investigation which have been found useful in the various sciences, and which have been carried to their greatest perfection in the physical sciences. In order to be a man of science—and by a man of science I don't mean simply one who goes about with a goodly number of bare facts more or less connected with science, but rather one who carries on his investigations,—in fact does all his work according to scientific methods, and is deeply imbued with a scientific spirit,—I say in order to be a man of science according to this view, it is not necessary, fortunately, to be acquainted with the details of every separate science, for the reason that the methods of investigation pursued in the various sciences are fundamentally the same; so much so that if you knew one or two sciences well—especially if they be sciences in a high state of perfection, as are the physical sciences more particularly in combination with mathematics—you have a key by which you may easily unlock all the other sciences. To teach us these

methods, which are in truth the theory of science, is the high province of logic—a subject in my humble opinion not yet at all adequately appreciated either in our schools or universities in England. I say England advisedly, for the Scotch universities have for a long time been doing much better work in the matter.

In viewing the order of the universe—the laws by which it is governed and the invariability of their action—an invariability, so far as the highest faculty with which we have been gifted, our reason, can inform us, never departed from—we come at last to the consideration of Man and the part he plays in the great scheme of creation. Man finds himself in a world which he himself has not made, that this world is under the dominion of certain laws, and, looking at himself outside the narrow boundary of his own conscious individuality, he gradually discovers that he himself, his actions and his thoughts, are as much under the government of unvarying laws as any other parts of nature, and that, whether he likes the process or not, he must learn those laws, bow down to them, and act through them. Endowed, however, with self-consciousness in a high degree, he lapses occasionally from this calm and philosophical view of his relations to the rest of crea-

tion, feeds on himself, and in the height of his vanity begins to look upon himself as the very mirror of nature.

In what way, then, and by what means is man able to acquire these mighty conceptions, to have ideas of the order of nature, and of the part he himself plays in it? By the use of what great instrument does he gain this knowledge, and the power to act on it? That instrument is his mind. Facts are the materials of our knowledge, but the mind itself is the instrument, and our ideas are the compound result of the action of external influences upon the mind, and of the action again of the mind itself in moulding them to a form fit for assimilation and permanent retention as part of the mental furniture of the individual. To analyse this mind—to break it up into its component elements—to trace back its structure down to its original simplicity—to travel along its natural and unforced development—to balance the influences of education and association—to trace the origin of belief and disbelief and the action of motives—to view the varying and often contending parts which intellect, feeling, passion and will play in the mental drama,—to do all this is the aim of what is called Psychology, or the philosophy of mind.

In viewing any subject of importance from a philosophical stand-point, it is always necessary to examine its relations to those of other subjects lying near it, or even remotely bearing on it. There are no hard and fast lines in nature, and it is useless for us to attempt to draw them in our own minds. The greater the complexity of the subject we are examining, the more does the truth of this view force itself upon us; and the most superficial glance at the complex structure of mind itself must convince anyone, I think, that a right understanding of the subject is only to be gained by a free use of the facts discovered by examinations conducted from various points of view, and by invoking the aid, not of one science, but of several. Much of the confusion and difference of opinion regarding mind and its functions is the result of investigations, conducted it may be for the same ends, but according to very different methods. The metaphysician, the theologian, the psychologist, and the physiologist, has each his separate method by which he flatters himself he can unravel the wondrous web before him. As the aim of philosophy is to systematize our conceptions derived from all these points of view, so we must avail ourselves of whatever

data of value each one can furnish us with.

The question may be asked, By what new philosophy are you to supersede the conclusions arrived at by these various classes of reasoners? or, if not to supersede them, By what means are you to select what you think true from each one of them, rejecting at the same time what you regard as false? The answer is, that you can only do this by employing, as far as possible, in the science of mind, the same methods of investigation and verification which have been found useful in all other sciences; by being careful to distinguish rigidly between hypothesis and theory based on sufficient data, and by being always ready to draw the line between what we know and what we do not know.

Whatever may be our ultimate view with regard to the fundamental structure of the mind—whether we look upon mind as an immaterial entity acting by means of, and through its instrument, the brain, or whether we regard the nervous system, and more especially the brain, as the organ of the mind, and the evolution of thought as the function of the brain—there can be no doubt whatever that the nervous system, and more particularly that part of it called the brain, is so intimately connected with the phe-

nomena of mind, that no system of psychology, ethics, or philosophy generally, can rest on a sure foundation which does not take for its bases the two sciences of life in health and disease, physiology and pathology. In examining, therefore, the structure and functions of mind, the psychologist, the physiologist, and the pathologist should work hand in hand, availing themselves of whatever data may be procured from metaphysics, the philosophy of history, comparison of man with the lower animals, and other sources of information.

A man's character is the compound result of original mental capacity, education, and association, and, always allowing for the influence of all these conditions, his actions are the result of motives, in whatever way these come. When an idea has been generated in the mind under agitating circumstances, and the impression made is afterwards kept up by a repetition occasionally of the original stimulus, or by the force of imagination, or, as another case, when a mind has been subjected to influences for which it has a peculiar affinity, the idea or ideas thus rising in the mind have a tendency gradually to become fixed, and to take their place as part of the individual's character. Men of very marked

characters are generally the bearers of fixed ideas. The man of ambition, the enthusiast, the ascetic, are instances illustrating what I mean. The influence of fixed ideas is often so great and overwhelming that at times of great mental exaltation all other ideas and feelings of less intensity are banished from consciousness, and on ordinary occasions lie more or less in the background of the mind. Take, for instance, the case of a man who lives and hopes in the idea of ambition (let his calling be what you like, so long as it is an absorbing one, say politics, literature, or science), and whose daily life is fashioned so far as he can mould his circumstances for the furtherance of that idea. How small and insignificant to such an one become the every-day drudgery and routine of life, how irksome every duty which seems to give him no help in the great race he has set himself to run! How he subordinates what are to him the minor considerations of pleasure and even health, and how at last in the height of his severe enthusiasm he persuades himself that "one crowded hour of glorious life is worth an age without a name!" With all his enthusiasm, however, he is sometimes tempted by the sense of weariness and the attraction of positive pleasures lying at his feet to give up the battle in

despair, and it is during such moments of weakness that he becomes the prey of that painful state of mind called a conflict of motives.

As it is a good rule in philosophy that we should endeavour when we can to seek for the meaning of the abstract in the concrete, in other words, that we should look for the illustration and explanation of our principles in examples; so with regard to my present paper I have chosen the play of Hamlet, and more especially the character of the Prince of Denmark, as the peg on which to hang what I have said and have still to say, on some general principles of psychology and philosophy. The great use of nearly all Shakspeare's characters, looked at philosophically (and this observation applies in a marked degree to Hamlet), is that in taking one of them up for examination we are not forced to leave the region of universal principles and descend to the mere details connected with some peculiar and unrepresentative individual. We find that we have simply returned to that world of nature and life from which our principles, if right, were extracted, and to which we once more betake ourselves for their illustration and verification.

With regard to Hamlet himself, I need hardly say that no person exactly like him in his life and

circumstances ever existed; that fact, however, being of no consequence whatever, so long as the character depicted by the poet, without being a real representation, is not inconsistent with nature. The aim of a great artist is not to give a mere copy of nature; his endeavour is that his picture, without being inconsistent with fact, should represent nature idealized and freed from the clogs and impurities which in the world of reality so often weigh her down and obscure her brightness from our limited vision. Art of any high kind may be defined not as the endeavour after nature in execution, but as the endeavour after perfection in execution. The poet attempts to express and delineate that perfection which nature continually suggests to us without actually giving us the perfected form.

The play of Hamlet, which for its unmistakable unity of design, in combination with marvellous complexity of structure, must ever excite the highest admiration of any one gifted with a love of mental analysis, hangs on a plot the bare outline of which I will now relate. Hamlet, the hero of the play, is the nephew of the reigning monarch of Denmark, and son of the late king, whose widow, Hamlet's mother, married her husband's brother, the present king. The throne having

been usurped by the present monarch, young Hamlet remains deprived of his just title, and in addition to that has the mortification of seeing his mother married to the usurper. Hamlet has occasionally dreams and imaginings that his father did not lose his crown by exactly fair means, and his suspicions are at last most painfully and vividly realised by the appearance of his father's Ghost, the Ghost informing him that his father was murdered, and that the murder was committed by the usurper, Hamlet's uncle. The Ghost, in addition to describing the murder, lays on Hamlet the command that the murder is to be avenged, and that Hamlet himself is to be the avenger. In conclusion, Hamlet is requested not to involve his mother in his vengeance. Hamlet has a sensitive, melancholy, and reflective mind, with a love of the exercise of plot and ingenuity, and, instead of hastening to his revenge in an ordinary manner, begins to doubt the accuracy of the Ghost's information, indulging also in the surmise that the Ghost itself may have been the coinage of his own brain. With the notion of bringing the matter to a test, he has a play performed before the King and Queen in which a murder similar in its circumstances and bearings to the supposed

murder of his father is represented. The conduct of the King during the play quite confirms the Ghost's story in Hamlet's eyes. Polonius, an old courtier, has a daughter, Ophelia, with whom Hamlet is in love; however, after receiving the Ghost's dreadful commission, Hamlet thinks it necessary to break his engagement with Ophelia, to cut off his connection with all his former pursuits, and to devote himself to the execution of the Ghost's commands. One of the principal parts of his plan for carrying out these various objects—the keeping the minds of the King and Queen and the minds of those about them away from his main design (which he confides to no one but his dear friend Horatio), and the breaking of his engagement with Ophelia—is the feigning of insanity. Some of those in the court, including the Queen and the wise and intriguing old Polonius, are taken in, and think Hamlet mad. The King, however, sees through the dissimulation, and determines to send Hamlet away to England, and, what is more, makes arrangements for his murder. Hamlet, ever suspicious, secretly opens the despatches containing the directions for his execution, substituting the names of the messengers for his own. In this way he allows the time to wear

on without wreaking his vengeance on the King. After staying away for some time he comes back to Denmark and meets, accidentally, in a churchyard, the funeral procession of the unfortunate Ophelia, who, suffering from Hamlet's rejection and the death of her father Polonius, who had been mortally wounded by Hamlet accidentally, became insane, and was at last found drowned, the supposition being that she had committed suicide. Her brother Laertes arrives on the scene determined to take vengeance for the death of his father and sister. Arrangements are made by the King for a mock duel between Hamlet and Laertes, the precaution, however, being taken that Laertes' foil should be unbuttoned and the end of it dipped in poison. In the excitement of the fight the duellists exchange foils, and both are wounded by the poisoned foil. Hamlet, spurred at last to his true revenge by the discovery of treachery, stabs the King, and the Queen drinks the poisoned wine which had been prepared for Hamlet in case he did not fall at the hands of Laertes.

In order to obtain a correct or at any rate consistent theory of the evolution of this complicated drama, it is necessary to examine carefully the two great component elements, so to speak, of the

play, and their action and reaction on each other, the character of the hero Hamlet, and the circumstances in which he was placed. For, in considering the part which a man plays in any action of life, and in comparing the respective influences of his intentions and aspirations and the way in which he seems at times to mould circumstances to his will, with the mode in which he himself is acted upon by his position, we must not forget that the man's own character is one of the ultimate facts of the case. A man's character, in spite of its plasticity, in spite of the influence of education and changing circumstances, is, to a great extent, a thing which cannot be altered, and as much an unvarying part of his individuality as the shape of his skull or the length of his legs. By bad institutions, bad creeds, benevolent despotisms, and the miserable devices of social tyrants, you can cramp character, bringing forth lopsided fragments of humanity; by freedom, lofty example, and broad education you can elevate character, but you cannot fundamentally change it. There is profound psychological truth in those words of Milton's put into the mouth of the majestic Satan, "The mind is its own place." This great fact in our nature is the grand safeguard on which we may rely, even when beaten at other

points, in the great fight which never ceases to rage between human development and tyrannies of all kinds, be they political, religious, or social. There are good arguments to be drawn from nature herself in favour of allowing to every individual that entire and unfettered liberty of thought and action which the philosopher can see the speculative necessity of, and which is the only guarantee for the complete development of intellectual width, in combination with moral honesty of character. The grand object of all education is, or ought to be, to develope to their highest extent a man's capacities and individuality; and any system of politics, ethics, or religion which interferes with the perfect evolution of the whole of the faculties is to that extent at any rate an erroneous one.

In examining the bearing of Hamlet in the tragedy of his life, we find that the grand secret of his failure—for failure for purposes of action his life must certainly be considered—was the distinct incompatibility of his own nature with the circumstances in which he was artificially placed. We find him in a position for which he was utterly unfitted, and summoned to a duty to whose call his nature made no echo. As has been well said by Goethe, those words of Hamlet's, full of the profoundest melancholy, "The

time is out of joint: O God, that I was born to set it right!" give us the clue to his whole position and action in the play: they are the key by which we may unlock the secret doors of his character. And from this point of view there are only too many Hamlets in the world. With regard to a man possessing a common every-day character, it is not of much consequence what position he is in: he tumbles into a trade or profession he knows not how, nor cares to inquire, simply because his father put him there: it is not a matter of much concern to him whether he becomes a tailor or a physician, a parson or a shoemaker: if you were to ask him why he took up his particular calling, he would probably stare for a moment or two, and then reply with a certain unctuous self-complacency, if not using these very words, at any rate their equivalent, that he was doing his duty in that state of life to which it had pleased God to call him, and there the matter would end. But every now and then amongst men we know, or know of, we see a Hamlet, a man of marked ability and peculiar sensitiveness of temperament, labouring painfully in a business or profession for which he is thoroughly unfitted, and for which he has no liking, the details and drudgery of which

are only irksome and irritating to him. On the positive side of his character, he is possibly conscious of the possession of talents and aspirations leading him constantly into fields of thought far away from his every-day duties and occupations: he lives habitually in two worlds, an ideal one and an actual one. In this way he becomes the prey of most painful mental conflicts, the intensity of which occasionally almost drives him to desperation. The sad result of this state of things on a sensitive nature, is too often the setting up of a condition of chronic and habitual irritability, which may end either in actual insanity, or in such a weakening of the brain's power, that the individual, unless invigorated by an entire change of scene and occupation, becomes utterly unfit for anything like sustained mental effort.

In spite of the great complexity and apparent inconsistency of Hamlet's character, which on a superficial view may appear as nothing more than a collection of chaotic elements constantly at war with one another, we find, after a closer examination of the play, as much unity as comprehensiveness in its details—to use Byron's noble words, "A vastness which grows, but grows to harmonise, all musical in its immensities." We find that event follows

cause in orderly array, and that the hero moves on hesitatingly, though surely, to the fulfilment of his destiny. There is no necessity for us to land in abject fatalism, because we believe, as science certainly teaches us, that the human mind itself is as much under the dominion of never-varying laws as any other portions of nature. If we could learn with perfect accuracy the whole of the qualities of a man's character, and the varying intensities of his different feelings, and, in addition to this, could acquaint ourselves as accurately with the circumstances of his position, we could predict with exactitude the course of all his actions. Man does not stand apart from the rest of nature, controlling his actions and his relations simply according to the varying state of his feelings and wishes. He himself, including his own mind, is part of that nature, and moves along, as regularly as the planets, in the course which has been appointed him. He cannot fight against the future—time is as much against him as for him—his fate cries out and he must face the inevitable. We see Hamlet with the millstone of a horrible duty round his neck, bewailing his destiny, and resorting to every kind of delay, artifice, and dissimulation, with

the idea of evading it, but all in vain. The Ghost's injunctions come before his mind with "damnable iteration," for they are written on the tablets of his memory far more indelibly than he ever wished them to be: he curses his fate and tries to explain it away, he unpacks his heart with words and puts on an antic disposition, relieves his mind and delays action by abusing his mother: when he sees the king at prayer, instead of sweeping to his revenge he still delays, professing to be horrified at the idea of sending his enemy to heaven: he actually consents to leave the scene of action for a time, although he has confessedly no reason for having still to say "This thing's to do." At last on the appearance of Laertes at the grave of his beloved Ophelia, he is impelled to action by the very excitement of the scene, but his action is the result of passion and not of reason,—as he himself somewhere else says, "Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well when our deep plots do fail,"—and in the final scene of this strange eventful history, he stabs the king in the frenzy of his death struggle, prompted chiefly to the act by the horror and disgust which his sensitive nature experiences at the discovery of treachery. As has been

well said by the great Goethe, the closing acts of Hamlet's career "appear more as the fulfilment of destiny than the result of deliberate human will."

As I have said before, a consistent theory of the evolution of this play is to be found in an examination of Hamlet's character and the circumstances in which he was placed. Hamlet is pictured to to us as a young man possessing highly sensitive and emotional qualities of mind, in combination with most refined intellectual insight and subtlety, original reasoning power of a high order, exalted, and at the same time softened, by a brilliant and most delicate imagination; and yet, judged critically, these splendid powers of mind do not appear in their perfectly developed form—they seem to be beautiful young buds rather than fully expanded flowers. Whatever notes he touches, he touches brilliantly, and yet lightly as with the finger of genius, but his songs are more like exquisite snatches of melody than the music of completed conceptions. His noble mind, tentative in its efforts, seems to be waiting and yearning for some favourable soil in which it may germinate, and for problems of thought and policy worthy of its greatness. Hamlet, I think, is deeply interesting to us, not only for his

rare exhibitions of mental resources already vouchsafed to us, but also by suggesting the immense reserve force lying, as it were, latent, or partially developed, in the background, waiting only for favourable matter and opportunity on which to exercise itself. It is stimulating to reflect into what a giant he might have grown had his lot been cast in a fair and open field, say in the world of literature or politics. It is true that he appears to us in the play as a man almost solely of speculative and reflective ability, and certainly weak in capacity for action; but this does not necessarily involve our looking upon him merely as a dreamy, brooding egoist, unfitted by his very nature for ever battling with the realities of applied thought and practical life. We see him in that stage of development through which minds of a certain high class invariably pass—the stage of what has been called "reflective indecision"—before the conceptions are systematized, before the will has been fashioned, and before the individual has placed himself thinkingly, and, as far as he can, actually, in harmony with the circumstances by which he is surrounded. The will, in so far as it is the instrument and servant of reason, and not merely another name for unreasoning impulse, is not innate, is not a

necessary part of our constitution from birth, but is gradually formed and built up as the result of natural development and constantly repeated efforts; until the will is thoroughly fashioned and acts almost unconsciously and involuntarily, the character cannot be said to be complete, and, judged by this criterion, Hamlet's is incomplete, his individuality is not perfect. I prefer to regard him myself as a splendid specimen of humanity, full of promise, but arrested in his development, and that too in the very blossoming of his powers; called to a career and placed among circumstances for which he was utterly unfit, driven through want of healthier outlets for his activity to brooding self-consciousness, the victim at last of melancholy and despair. In thinking of Hamlet and his destiny, the sad words of Ophelia come naturally to our lips, "What a noble mind is here o'erthrown!"

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